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Vote on Nicaraguan Rebels: Either Way, a Turning Point

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WASHINGTON, March 16 — To everyone involved in the debate over American policy in Central America, the approaching vote in Congress on whether to renew aid to the Nicaraguan rebels is a turning point.

Whatever the result of the vote, which is expected some time this spring, the American position toward Nicaragua is likely to change profoundly, United States and Nicaraguan officials say.

First article of a series on the Nicaraguan rebels.

The White House says it probably does not now have the votes it needs and plans an "all-out press on this issue" in the weeks ahead, an Administration official said.

But if President Reagan cannot persuade Congress to give the rebels $14 million, as he has requested, "I think there is a pretty good chance you'll see the policy begin to unravel," a senior Administration official acknowledged.

Role of the C.I.A.

Enrique Bermúdez, military commander of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest rebel group, agrees, saying: "It would be the most damaging thing to us, for our morale. The Sandinistas will interpret it as a signal that the United States has retreated."

Congress ended aid to the rebels last year after more than $80 million was reportedly channeled to them through the Central Intelligence Agency over the previous three years.

Many members of Congress, although still sympathetic to the rebels' goal — changing or removing the Sandinista Government — said they believed the program had been mismanaged by the C.I.A.

At the same time, Congress agreed to reconsider the issue after Feb. 28, 1985, and said the Administration could then request as much as $14 million in renewed aid.

If the White House wins the vote in Congress, several senior American officials said, the United States is likely to widen its diplomatic war against the Sandinista Government significantly, possibly using trade sanctions, economic boycotts and a reduction in diplomatic relations.

This is something the Government in Managua realizes. Victor Hugo Tinoco, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Nicaragua, calls this "a very important moment to us" because if the aid is approved, "it will bring the United States closer to direct intervention."

And in Washington, Administration officials are making a special point of letting people know that a 1982 law preventing them from spending money for the overthrow of the Nicaraguan Government, known as the Boland Amendment, has expired.

'A Way of Testing Support'

Although no one in the United States Government is saying that direct American military involvement in Nicaragua is likely, a senior American official said the Administration viewed the approaching vote as "a way of testing support," adding that if the aid is approved, "it may very well be appropriate to do more."

"This vote is not just symbolic," said Senator Richard G. Lugar, Republican of Indiana, who is chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

He said he favored renewed aid to the rebels, adding: "The President's new enunciation of policy is very ambitious, and to get the job done, a great deal of added activity will be required. It will probably occur."

The new enunciation of policy that Mr. Lugar mentioned was Mr. Reagan's statement last month that his goal was to "remove" the "present structure" of the Nicaraguan Government unless "they'd say uncle."

As if to underscore that point, for the last few weeks the Administration has been telling members of Congress and others that they are now legally entitled to spend money with the intent of toppling the Sandinista Government.

The Boland Amendment, whose principal sponsor was Representative Edward P. Boland, Democrat of Massachusetts, who was then chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, said no United States money could be spent "for the purpose of overthrowing the Government of Nicaragua."

The amendment was approved in the House by a vote of 411 to 0 and accepted by Senate conferees, and since then members of Congress and others have cited it in reaction to what they see as particularly bellicose statements from the White House.

But the Defense Department general counsel's office issued a legal opinion this month that says that "the Boland Amendment is applicable only to funds appropriated under the 1983 appropriations act" and has, therefore, expired.

Congressional staff members concerned with the issue say the general counsel is correct. And in an interview, a senior Defense Department official said he wanted to "make that loud and clear."

"Whatever else may be wrong with the Reagan proposal," he added, "this is not part of it. There is no legal prohibition, with the resumption of aid, to seeking the overthrow of the Nicaraguan Government."

'To Clear Up Misconceptions'

The official added that the Administration "is just trying to clear up misconceptions about the law." But with those statements, and with President Reagan's remarks last month, the Administration may finally have settled the debate over the intent of Washington's aid to the rebels, members of Congress and others say.

A senior intelligence official said the White House "is bent on overthrowing them," referring to the Sandinistas, "and that's why they're making such a point of saying they are not constrained by law."

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, who is vice chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, said: "They are making that point up here very strongly. But it is going to take some amazing political sophistry for the Administration to claim that Congress has given them the green light to go ahead and overthrow the Sandinistas."

When asked if overthrowing the Sandinistas is the Administration's goal, a senior member of the National Security Council said: "The President has spoken on this very clearly, but I wouldn't say a military overthrow is the best possible way of changing the Government. It would be better if Daniel Ortega packed his bags and moved to Havana." Daniel Ortega Saavedra is President of Nicaraguan.

Administration officials know the rebels alone cannot defeat the Sandinista forces. As Gen. Paul F. Gorman, who just left his post as the American commander of military forces in Central America and is retiring, told a Senate committee last month, "I don't see any prospect that these guys in the hills are going to march into Managua."

Continued

'A More Ambitious Policy'

So to change the Sandinista Government, in addition to renewed aid, "we're going to have to bring into place a more ambitious policy," Senator Lugar said.

No longer do White House officials say they want Congress to approve aid primarily so the rebels can intercept arms shipments to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador. That was the Administration's first rationale.

Today, Administration officials and critics alike say the rebels have probably slowed whatever flow of arms there was to El Salvador, but indirectly — the Nicaraguans are so preoccupied with their own insurgency that they do not have time to worry about El Salvador's guerrillas.

But a senior State Department official directly involved with the Nicaragua program said the idea that the rebels had been armed and equipped initially so they could intercept arms shipments was ludicrous.

"That would be an extraordinary way to use them," he said. "It would be a fool's errand. It would be exceedingly difficult for them to do."

Last year, the Administration used a different rationale, saying the United States was helping the rebels so they could exert "pressure" on the Nicaraguan Government in the hope that the Government would be forced to make concessions in the Contadora peace talks. Those talks, which have been under way for more than two years but have been stalled since September, are intended to produce a regional peace treaty for Central America and end fighting in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

A Change of Government

Administration officials say pressure is still the object of rebel aid, and they also say they hope the pressure will force the Sandinistas to make concessions in the peace talks.

But the officials now say the ultimate aim of the pressure, and the only acceptable outcome in Nicaragua, is a change of Government in Managua.

That change could come through the Contadora peace talks, the officials say. But the only Contradora agreement that would be acceptable in Washington, Administration officials say, is one in which the Sandinista Government renounced its Marxist ideals, invalidated the recent elections and turned the country into a "pluralistic democracy" with leaders acceptable to the Reagan Administration. That, they add, is unlikely, even with continued pressure from the rebels.

Even as the officials say they hope their objections to the Nicaraguan Government can be resolved through the Contadora negotiations, they cite another objective, the hope that the rebel "pressure" will ultimately cause the Sandinista Government to collapse from within.

"We hope they might disintegrate," a senior State Department official said.

Food and Fuel Shortages

To fight the rebels, the Nicaraguan Government says it must devote 40 percent of its resources to the military. Others say the percentage is even higher. As a result, Nicaragua faces severe shortages of food, gasoline and consumer goods.

The Government's program of forced military conscription is unpopular, too, especially since young men are sometimes hauled off on city buses and forced into the army. Even the Nicaraguan Government admits that internal discontent is rising.

White House officials repeatedly cite this fact, arguing that these internal problems, along with the insurgency, could bring down the Nicaraguan Government.

But Edén Pastora Gómez disagrees.

Mr. Pastora was a Sandinista Government official until he left the country to lead the second largest anti-Sandinista guerrilla force, the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance.

An Admitted Gamble

While in Washington last month to lobby for renewed aid, he said: "People here think shortages will make the people rise up against the Government. But scarcity actually helps the Communists because they have total control over the supplies."

A State Department official said, "I would argue that the dissatisfaction curve is going up faster than the state control curve." By state control, he meant authoritarian measures imposed by the Sandinista Government.

But in the end, Reagan Administration officials acknowledge that even if aid to the rebels is renewed, their policy is a gamble.

They admit that the insurgency has probably hastened the Nicaraguan Government's arms buildup and given the Sandinistas an excuse to put in place strict authoritarian controls.

"One has to accept that there is an element of truth to that," a State Department official said. "But it is our position that they were rushing pell-mell in that direction, even before the existence of the contras," as the rebels are sometimes known.

"The presence of the contras does give the Sandinistas a focal point, a reason to overmilitarize," Senator Lugar acknowledged.

A senior member of the National Security Council said: "This is one of those dilemmas of which there are many other historical examples. But our readings on how to go were made very carefully. I can assure you that the judgment was not made quickly."